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ABSTRACT

Recent years have indicated a shift by black students in their attitudes toward Black Studies programs. These students now judge programs by their pragmatic, rather than polemical, value in serving as an entree to professional schools. This trend is paralleled by a declining economic situation which may force colleges to terminate programs they consider marginal. Black educators should respond to these trends by re-evaluating their Black Studies programs (many of which ought to be called Afro-New World Studies, since they do not limit their focus to blacks in the United States). Black Studies departments must articulate goals that are as academically oriented as those of other departments, and must also compel their students to attain basic verbal and analytical skills. Finally, these departments ought to reflect the basic strengths of the colleges where they are found. (WP)

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AFRO-NEW WORLD STUDIES:
A New Name and Orientation

by

Whittington B. Johnson

*** A N A B S T R A C T ***

In this study, I have identified two reasons why some thought should be given to revising black studies programs: (1) that the temper of the times has changed — black students are now more vocation-oriented and less militant than black students of the 1960s; and (2) that administrators are under less pressure to react favorably toward these than formerly, especially if they are marginal. I have also suggested that many programs would do well to change their names to Afro-New World Studies, since they focus upon peoples of African origins in the Western Hemisphere, the majority of whom are not Afro-American. Moreover, departmental objectives should be redefined in instances where these objectives are either too broad or they are inconsistent with the role of academic units in universities; departmental course offerings could attain the sequential character and cohesive unity required of academic programs if they were grouped into subject-matter areas; and majors should be required to concentrate in a subject-matter area. Finally, black-oriented programs should be geared to the strengths of the universities with which they are affiliated.

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This article is the outgrowth of a review of curricula of a select number of Black Studies Departments which offer majors in Black Studies.¹ These departments were spawned by the idealistic motivated unrest which pervaded academia in the 1960s and early 1970s demanding that universities become more sensitive to the black experience by having additional black professors and instituting programs that are relevant to the black experience.² The curricula developed during this period tended to address the shortcomings of a country which was wedded to racism and seemed reluctant about giving Afro-Americans and the black experience any visibility. Divided along racial lines, the country needed academic programs which reflected this reality. Many black students, seeking relief from traditional programs which subscribed to the "invisible man" image of black Americans, flocked to

¹ For suggestions concerning Black Studies Programs in general, see Whittington B. Johnson and Ted Nichols, "Black Studies: A Key to the Future," Journal of Negro Education, XLVI (Spring, 1977), 118-123.

² Nick Aaron Ford, Black Studies: Threat-or-Challenge (New York, 1973) is perhaps the most detailed study of these programs available.

black oriented programs and courses offered by their universities. By the late 1970s, however, much of the idealism which shaped the earlier actions of black students gave way to more mundane motivations that were tied to the pragmatic realities associated with attaining high job market visibility, and this has adversely affected enrollment in many black oriented courses and programs.

Le Roi R. Ray asked: "Who will assess black studies at white universities, and what criteria for assessment will be used?"³ Ultimately, black students will evaluate black studies programs and they will evaluate them on the basis of their ability to provide them with skills and knowledge required by graduate schools, professional schools and employers. This evaluation by students is the great challenge facing black studies programs, and they will be judged on their ability to increase the visibility of their students in the market place, and not on the nature of the subject matter offered in the programs.

It is very important, therefore, that curriculum developers take a long hard look at the present student population. To misjudge them could be disastrous. They are more pragmatic than their older brothers and sisters of the late 1960s and early 1970s. To them Rap Brown is ancient, maybe

³ Le Roi R. Ray, "Black Studies: A Discussion of Evaluation," Journal of Negro Education, XLV (Fall, 1976), 384.

not quite as ancient as Frederick Douglass, but ancient. They remember only vaguely the incidents of the 1960s. Many of them are too busy trying to "make it" to become "involved."

Another important fact which curriculum developers should keep in mind is that the temper of the times has changed; it is highly unlikely that the wave of moral indignation which swept the country during the 1960s will return during the lifetime of those currently holding professorships in black studies departments. Moreover, during the next decade, residents in the United States will be asked to make great personal sacrifices and traditionally, periods of economic privation have brought out the worst in Americans. What this boils down to is that there will be fewer administrators around who will succumb to pressures from civil rights groups, and there will be fewer funds available to underwrite programs; hence, the marginal ones will be curtailed. It is important that programs geared to the black experience avoid falling into the marginal category.

These programs have developed along three lines: African Studies, Afro-American Studies, and Afro-New World Studies. African Studies, quite obviously, focus on Africa; Afro-American Studies focus upon the black experience in the United States; and Afro-New World Studies focus upon peoples of African origin in the Western Hemisphere. A large number of black studies programs are really Afro-New World Studies, although this term has not been used. For instance, Yale Uni-

versity's Afro-American Studies program states: "The Afro-American Studies major is designed to afford students a comprehensive understanding of the history and the circumstances of peoples of African origin in the New World..."⁴ Howard University's states: "The goals of the Department of Afro-American Studies are: to provide a fundamental understanding of the economic, social, and political forces that have shaped Afro-American experience in the Western hemisphere..."⁵ The Afro-New World Studies character of the programs at Ohio State University and City University of New York is reflected in some of the courses they offer. Ohio State offers BS 541, The Black Experience in Caribbean, African, and Afro-American Literature. The course explores the "themes, attitudes, and parallels in black literature of Africa, the United States and the Caribbean;" particular stress is given to "Negritude and Pan-Africanism."⁶ City University of New York offers BLST 177, Black Leaders, which "examines roles of the Afro-American, Spanish-American, African, and Afro-Caribbean leader within his own ethnic group and nation," and BLST 178, "Negritude as a Cultural Movement," which is "a study of the concept of Negritude as a Cultural movement in Afro-French lit-

⁴ Yale College Programs of Study (Fall and Spring terms 1974-1975), 69.

⁵ Bulletin of the College of Liberal Arts (1974-1976), 13.

⁶ Ohio State University Bulletin (course offerings 1976-77).

erature and the influence of the United States Negro Renaissance movement." ⁷

It is obvious from the sampling of objectives and course descriptions of these programs that they could more accurately be called Afro-New World Studies, since they direct their attention to the experiences of peoples of African origins in the New World, not just to those in the United States. This is as it should be, for the enslavement of millions of Africans and their subsequent removal to the Western Hemisphere have raised questions which can only be answered in a perspective which transcends national boundaries. Afro-New World Studies offers the academic framework for providing answers to these questions. ⁸

In addition to renaming programs which focus upon the experiences of peoples of African origin in the Western Hemisphere, departmental objectives in many instances should be redefined. Since black studies departments are academic units, their objectives should meet criteria consistent with this status. One of the goals of the Black Studies Department at City University of New York is "to redirect the institutions of education to make them of service to the Black

⁷ Undergraduate Bulletin the City University of New York: College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (1977-1978), 65.

⁸ Johnson and Nichols, "Black Studies: A Key to the Future," 119.

World."⁹ The Black Studies Department at the University of Pittsburgh states that:

Black Studies . . . places additional responsibility on the development of community relatedness, teaching effectiveness and methodological-pedagogical uniqueness as defined by the real conditions facing the masses of black people in the world and in this local community.¹⁰

These objectives from the City University of New York and the University of Pittsburgh programs should be either deleted, or rewritten, because they are beyond their capabilities.

Does the phrase "black people in the world" in the Pittsburgh objective refer to Haiti, Nigeria, Guyana and the Bahamas? If so, are we to assume from the objective that these areas and black ghettos in the United States have common problems?

Does the program have the resources to assume the awesome task of providing answers to the complex problems which confront "the masses" of peoples of African origins, the most heterogeneous group in the world?

Departmental objectives of some black studies programs also reflect a tendency to articulate goals that are non-

⁹ Undergraduate Bulletin the City University of New York, 59.

¹⁰ University of Pittsburgh Bulletin: The College of Arts and Sciences (1975-1977), 37.

academic. For instance, one of the goals of Ohio State's Black Studies program is "to maintain liaison relationship with individuals and agencies who share similar interests and goals for minority students."¹¹ Certainly the temptation is there to provide for the total needs of black students, but academic units should pursue academic goals and leave the other goals to appropriate units of the university.

Disenchantment with traditional programs has forced Afro-American Studies programs, in some universities, to assume objectives that contravene those associated with traditional departments. It should be remembered, however, that the disenchantment was with the failure of these departments to devote their expertise and scholarship to exploring the American experience in its entirety. The research skills of white scholars were not questioned; rather, it was their use of those skills that was questioned. More specifically, developing research, writing, reading and analytical skills in the social sciences and humanities, and performance skills in the fine arts should be lauded, not rejected. Howard University's Afro-American Studies Department lists as one of its objectives providing "an opportunity for research and creativity in the area of Afro-American Studies."¹² Indiana Uni-

¹¹ The Office of Black Student Programs and Development (Ohio State University), 8.

¹² Howard University Bulletin, 13.

versity also stresses developing research skills — "The Afro-American Studies Program at Indiana University is . . . designed to introduce students to a wide range of empirical research and current thinking related to the history of Black Americans." ¹³ Michigan's Afro-American Studies program aims to provide "insight into past and present circumstances of peoples of African descent." ¹⁴ These objectives are consistent with those of other academic units in their universities.

Graduates of programs that do not stress research, reading, writing and analytical skills, will not fare very well on the GRE, LSAT, MSAT, and other standardized tests which are geared to evaluate mastery of these skills. Since graduate and professional schools depend to a great extent upon the results of these tests in selecting students for their programs, objectives of Afro-New World programs should stress these skills. The difference between Afro-New World Studies programs and traditional programs, therefore, should be in the nature of the subject matter, not in the specificity and intellectuality of the departmental objectives.

Afro-New World Studies programs should also give some attention to course offerings, for too often programs are

¹³ Indiana University Bulletin: Bloomington College of Arts and Sciences (1976-1977), 40.

¹⁴ The University of Michigan Bulletin: College of Literature, Science and the Arts (1975-1976), 45.

composed of a smorgasbord of courses that do not form a sequential cohesive unit. Students are encouraged, sometimes required, to take a smattering of courses from a variety of academic disciplines which may, or may not, be related. The following course of study, although perhaps atypical, reflects in spirit, nevertheless, a practice that is common among these programs. In this program the majors are required to take the following twenty-four credit hours of core courses:

A 351	Afro-American Art I	(3 cr)
A 352	Afro-American Art II	(3 cr)
A 355	Afro-American History I	(3 cr)
A 356	Afro-American History II	(3 cr)
A 369	Early Black American Writing I	(3 cr)
A 370	Recent Black American Writing II	(3 cr)
A 394	Black Music in the Americas I	(3 cr)
A 395	Contemporary Jazz and Soul Music II	(3 cr)

Students are also required to take additional "Afro-American courses or cross-listed courses."¹⁵

¹⁵ Indiana University Bulletin: Bloomington, 40-41. The University of Illinois (Chicago Circle) has a core of 20 credit hours (five courses), the total number of hours for a major in Black Studies being 44. University of Illinois Chicago Circle Bulletin: Undergraduate Study, 138; the University of Maryland at College Park, requires "twelve hours of basic courses" and thirty-six hours for a major. University of Maryland at College Park Undergraduate Catalogue (1974-1975), 62; San Jose State University also requires twelve credits of core courses and thirty-six hours for a major. San Jose State University Bulletin (1976-1978).

There are a number of things wrong with this requirement: (1) the major is composed almost entirely of a series of survey courses; (2) the student is expected to be competent in too many disciplines; and (3) the program is too tightly structured.

The idea of a major implies that a person has sufficient mastery of a body of knowledge to converse intelligently about the discipline and to pursue graduate work successfully. The overabundance of survey courses and the multiplicity of disciplines would militate against the above program preparing its students adequately to meet the challenges of advanced training. More upper division courses, those with a narrower scope, are needed in the program, and there should be fewer required courses. Whenever required courses in a major exceed three, the program tends to be tightly structured.

The major reason for the high number of required courses in Afro-American Studies programs is the desire of the departments to provide students with the broad academic base needed to complete course work in the horizontally structured programs. This leads to another suggestion: Afro-New World Studies programs should be structured vertically. By this I mean, rather than requiring students to master the bodies of knowledge of several disciplines, departmental courses should be grouped into "subject-matter areas" (as City University refers to it),¹⁶ i.e., Humanities, Social Sciences, Fine

¹⁶ Undergraduate Bulletin, City University of New York, 59.

Arts, Business, etc., and students should be required to concentrate in one of the subject-matter areas. Instead of requiring students to take eighteen to twenty-four hours of core courses, departments could offer a two-sequence introductory course for each discipline, i.e., Afro-New World Humanities, I-II, and Afro-New World Social Institutions, I-II, if the size of the department permits; if not, a two-sequence introductory course could be offered, i.e., Introduction to Afro-New World Studies, I-II, or a one semester survey may be adequate. In pursuing this approach, departments could thus devote additional time to developing and offering additional upper division courses. Moreover, because of the inter-relatedness of courses in these subject-matter areas, some of them should be conducive to team teaching. A required senior seminar or practicum, (using team teaching), would be an ideal complement to the required introductory courses. This would insure that majors in a subject-matter area would develop an integrated perspective about the body of knowledge in the subject-matter area rather than a compartmentalized multi-discipline one. Given the mastery of research, writing, reading and analytical skills (performance skills for fine arts majors) and this new body of integrated knowledge, students exposed to a program structured along the lines suggested above would be infinitely more attractive as job applicants and as potential graduate students than those who are presently pursuing majors in Afro-American Studies.

Finally, Afro-New World Studies programs should be geared

to the strengths of their universities, for obvious reasons. Programs at teacher-training institutions, which strive to develop along liberal arts lines, are inviting trouble as are programs at technological institutes which strive to develop strong education and philosophy offerings. If the university is strong in the social sciences, the Afro-New World Studies program at that institution should emphasize the social sciences, thus enabling it to capitalize on the library holdings and whatever research tools and resources are available. If, on the other hand, the university is strong in all areas, the Afro-New World Studies program has a number of options opened to it, but care should be taken to guard against spreading itself too thin.

In this study, I have identified two reasons why some thought should be given to revising black studies programs: (1) that the temper of the times has changed — black students are now more vocation-oriented and less militant than black students of the 1960s; and (2) that administrators are under less pressure to react favorably toward these than formerly, especially if they are marginal. I have also suggested that many programs would do well to change their names to Afro-New World Studies, since they focus upon peoples of African origins in the Western Hemisphere, the majority of whom are not Afro-American. Moreover, departmental objectives should be redefined in instances where these objectives are either too broad or they are inconsistent with the role of academic units

in universities; departmental course offerings could attain the sequential character and cohesive unity required of academic programs if they were grouped into subject-matter areas; and majors should be required to concentrate in a subject-matter area. Finally, black-oriented programs should be geared to the strengths of the universities with which they are affiliated.

If these revisions are implemented, Afro-New World Studies programs would be capable to producing a new generation of scholars who could bring fresh integrated (interdisciplinary and geographically) approach to teaching and researching the New World experiences of peoples of African origins, thus broadening their employment options (Caribbean institutions of higher learning should be interested in these scholars) and hastening the day when giving mere lip service to the experiences of descendants of African slaves brought to the New World would be replaced by substantive efforts at attempting to understand these experiences in a broad, more meaningful context.